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SUBJECT: SRI LANKAN WAR HEATS UP TAMIL NADU POLITICS

1. (SBU) Summary: A dramatic self-immolation by a young man in Chennai protesting Tamil civilian casualties in Sri Lanka gave opportunistic fringe parties a political opening. Their efforts to whip up more widespread protests through the call for a statewide general strike, however, fell flat due to lack of participation by the state's major political parties and quick government action to preempt any escalation. The occasion led Tamil Nadu's DMK Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi to criticize the the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, decisively casting the DMK's lot with Congress in the upcoming elections. We expect Karunanidhi to step up his efforts in New Delhi to influence Colombo to minimize civilian casualties and offer a credible devolution package to Sri Lanka's Tamils. End summary.

Self-immolation in protest of Sri Lankan war

2. (SBU) On January 29, Muthukumar, a 26 year-old Tamil activist committed suicide by immolating himself in front of a government office building in Chennai to protest the killing of Tamil civilians in Sri Lanka. Muthukumar reportedly shouted protests against the Government of India's support of Sri Lanka's armed forces before setting himself on fire. Students, lawyers, and politicians from fringe political parties which support the LTTE seized on Muthukumar's "act of martyrdom" to try to turn emotions in the state in favor of the Sri Lankan Tamil cause. Their protests turned sporadically violent, resulting in damage to offices of two Sri Lankan-associated institutions, the Bank of Ceylon and Sri Lankan Airlines. Protestors also directed their ire at Indian government officials, burning effigies of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi. Initial reports of other suicides attributed to protest against Sri Lanka turned out to be less clear-cut than Muthukumar's: for example, a man who jumped from a cell phone tower was reportedly mentally ill.

Government acts quickly to cool things down

3. (SBU) Worried that Muthukumar's self-immolation and the subsequent political protests could get out of hand, the state government quickly moved to cool down the situation. The government ordered an indefinite closure of all of the state's colleges and their dormitories. A senior government contact told post that the government was particularly concerned about the government-run liberal arts and law colleges. He said these colleges "are hotbeds of agitation. There are too many young people with too much time." The government also stepped up security at the Sri Lankan Deputy High Commission, stopping anyone from driving or walking down the

busy thoroughfare. Instead of arriving at a Consulate-hosted lunch in his usual Mercedes flying the Sri Lankan flag, the Sri Lankan Deputy High Commissioner came late for the lunch in a nondescript vehicle without diplomatic tags. The Deputy High Commissioner explained that he had to switch cars for security reasons.

General strike barely gets off the ground

¶4. (SBU) On February 4, Sri Lanka's national day, a group of small political parties in an ad hoc coalition called the "Eelam Tamils Protection Movement" (ETPM) held a general strike across the state to demand that India pressure Sri Lanka into a ceasefire with the LTTE. The strike barely got off the ground, especially in Chennai. There were minor disruptions and a few attacks on government buses in outlying districts, but the strike failed to achieve its goal of bringing life in the state to a halt. This was largely due to the fact that the state's two largest parties, the ruling DMK and the principal opposition AIADMK, did not participate. The ETPM is largely composed of fringe political parties, including the MDMK and VCK. (Note: Vaiko, the head of the MDMK, met then Presidential candidate Obama in Chicago in July 2008. Vaiko has since sharpened his rhetoric regarding the plight of Sri Lankan Tamils. End note.)

¶5. (SBU) Two mainstream parties participated in the general strike: the PMK and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The participation of the PMK, which is part of India's ruling UPA government and has two ministers in the central government, could be explained by the fact that it has been trying to distance itself from the state's ruling

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DMK (another UPA member) of late. A contact close to PMK Union Health Minister Ambumani Ramadoss told post that the PMK was likely to complete its break with the DMK by pulling out of the UPA over the Sri Lanka issue. The Tamil Nadu BJP extended half-hearted support to the strike, which observers attributed to the BJP's efforts to shake its image as a North Indian party.

DMK condemns LTTE

¶6. (SBU) DMK Chief Minister Karunanidhi addressed the party leadership on the eve of the February 4 general strike. Karunanidhi sharply criticized the LTTE for its fratricidal policies and dictatorial tendency. Referring to a 1987 magazine interview by Prabhakaran in which the LTTE leader described his plans for a dictatorship in the future Tamil nation, Karunanidhi reportedly said "from then on, I became sick of the Tigers' war... Later, many people were killed by the LTTE and the sympathy towards that movement was dwindling gradually and at one point, it completely vanished." He emphasized that his party's sympathy extends to Sri Lanka's Tamils, but not to the LTTE. At the same time, the DMK formally urged India and Sri Lanka to take immediate steps to ensure full devolution of powers to the Tamil dominated North and East of Sri Lanka. Karunanidhi announced that the DMK would organize state-wide rallies to garner support for its Sri Lanka policy. Karunanidhi further distanced the DMK from the LTTE-sympathizing ETPM by forming a competing umbrella organization he dubbed the "Sri Lankan Tamils Liberty and Welfare Organization."

¶7. (SBU) Observers from across the spectrum agreed that Karunanidhi took a big step by criticizing the LTTE at a time when concern for the Sri Lankan Tamils is high. An editor with The Hindu described Karunanidhi's coupling of criticism of the LTTE with his commitment to devolution as the political solution as "a big step; it was brilliant." The Sri Lankan Deputy High Commissioner said Karunanidhi's stand was "a welcome development."

DMK cries foul against PMK

¶8. (SBU) Karunanidhi accused the PMK of trying to bring down the state government by driving a wedge between the DMK and the Congress

party. (Note: The DMK lacks a majority in the state assembly and depends on the Congress party's support to maintain power in Tamil Nadu. End note.) Karunanidhi told reporters that the PMK "is trying to create enmity between me and the Center." Though the parties joined to form the Democratic Progressive Alliance (DPA) for the 2006 state elections, they have since fallen out with Karunanidhi kicking the PMK out of the DPA in 2008. The two, however, remain members of the Congress-led ruling UPA in New Delhi. The continued feuding at the state level makes it increasingly unlikely that the two parties will work together in the upcoming parliamentary elections, but media contacts refuse to guess which way the PMK will ultimately go. The party has a history of unpredictability.

19. (SBU) Comment: Concerns about the possibility of additional suicides and more violent protests after Muthukumar's self-immolation appear to have been unfounded. The failure of the general strike reinforces the belief that the LTTE's assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi reduced support for the terrorist organization in Tamil Nadu to the far fringes of the political spectrum. Sri Lanka, nonetheless, factors into Tamil Nadu's political situation. The DMK's past associations with Sri Lankan militant groups and Karunanidhi's personal penchant for Tamil identity politics make the party vulnerable to charges of betrayal by the LTTE-sympathizing fringe parties. In criticizing the LTTE and calling for devolution, Karunanidhi has made his most decisive break with the past. He has clearly cast his lot with the Congress party, largely out of political compulsion, but also perhaps in an effort to be on the right side of history as the LTTE's power wanes. With his eyes trained on the upcoming elections we expect Karunanidhi to demand that New Delhi influence Colombo to minimize civilian casualties and offer a credible devolution package. End comment.

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